

**Excerpted from “Why kids need to fail to succeed in school” MARGARET WENTE The Globe and Mail**

From her interview with Paul Tough, author of the new book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*. (Gordon M. Grant for the Globe and Mail)

The problem of failing kids is one of the most pressing issues of our time. Paul Tough is a realist about all this. But he is also an optimist. He has learned how two kids of equal abilities can have wildly different outcomes, and how kids with certain character traits can narrow the achievement gap.

Mr. Tough’s new book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*, combines compelling findings in brain research with his own first-hand observations on the front lines of school reform. **He argues that the qualities that matter most to children’s success have more to do with character** – and that parents and schools can play a powerful role in nurturing the character traits that foster success. His book is an inspiration. It has made me less of a determinist, and more of an optimist.

**You argue, quite convincingly, I think, that IQ is not destiny, far from it. For kids to succeed in life, they need certain character traits – and one of them is what you call “grit.”**

Yes, it’s a psychological category discovered by Angela Duckworth at the University of Pennsylvania. She actually started out studying self-control and demonstrated that it has a huge impact on kids’ grade point average. But she came to think that there was some other skill out there that she hadn’t quite put her finger on – not **just self-control but having a passion for something and a determination to stick with it, despite setbacks**. And she found that it’s incredibly predictive, that people are pretty honest about their grit levels and that those who say, **“Yes, I really stick with tasks,” are much more likely to succeed**, even in tasks that involve a lot of what we think of as IQ. Academic persistence is not just smarts, it’s the ability to stick with a task that makes a difference.

**Resistance, persistence, perseverance, stick-to-itiveness ...**

Yes, and I would add passion. It’s not just dutiful stick-to-itiveness. **It’s people who really want to finish – not because someone has told them to, but because they’re dedicated to it.**

That’s very new in a world where we’ve raised kids based on the self-esteem movement. So how do you teach grit? Can you?

I think you can. There’s not yet a clear path, but it seems like there are a few things that help. **The main one is helping kids learn how to manage failure and adversity**. That involves two things: One is just making sure they actually have some failure and adversity in their lives. That’s often what’s missing.

These kids are so overly protected that they don’t have the opportunity to overcome setbacks. It’s also giving them that experience in a setting that lets them not just be disappointed and hurt by failure, but learn from it.

**So tell me a little bit more about why failure – productive failure – is so important to character development.**

There is this study that came out recently from a few psychologists that talks about the number of adverse experiences kids have growing up. This not really serious adversity, just run-of-the-mill setbacks. **What's interesting is that the kids who experience more of those, generally, find that their psychological well-being goes down – but so do kids who experience no adversity.**

Where I saw this most clearly, I think, was in a chess class I spent a lot of time following. The teacher, Elizabeth Spiegel, has figured out that chess is the perfect laboratory for learning how to manage failure, because in chess you fail all the time. No matter how good you are, you lose about half your games. And even when you win, you're making terrible mistakes all the time. So you have to figure out a strategy for dealing with failure.

So there are kids who, when they try to play chess and start to fail, they just decide, "Oh, I don't really care about chess. I'm losing too much." And there are those who beat themselves up about it. Neither group does all that well. But a third group, which Ms. Spiegel tries to develop, is made up of kids who take their failures very seriously but divorce themselves from it a little bit; they say, "Okay, let me actually analyze the mistakes that I made: What can I do differently next time?" I'm talking about cognitive therapies that let you look at your own processes and say, "Okay, what are the mistakes I keep making and what can I do differently?"

I think there is a real difference between developing self-esteem and developing character, and in the past few decades we've become confused about that. Yes, **if you want to develop kids' self-esteem, the best way to do it is to praise everything they do and make excuses for their failures.**

**But if you want to develop their character, you do almost the opposite: You let them fail and don't hide their failures from them or from anybody else – not to make them feel lousy about themselves, but to give them the tools to succeed next time.**

I think in some ways we know this, because lots of us have had that experience with a teacher or a coach or a music tutor; the ones that we remember are the ones who were tough on us, not mean or belittling, but the ones who said, "**No, this isn't good enough. You can do better.**" That's an incredibly powerful message for a kid to hear. It's not wounding.

**The larger message, then, is how much non-cognitive character traits matter to success in life.** The same persistence and character strength that get them through college are going to help them in whatever else they do. It's not empty self-esteem, they've really proved to themselves that they are able to do something that everyone else thought was impossible.